FILM REVIEWS

Lies We Tell
dir. by Lisa Mulcahy (2023)

Ireland's literary and heritage establishments have made some attempts in the twenty-first century toward recovering the substantial legacy of the author J. Sheridan Le Fanu. Coinciding with the 2014 bicentenary of the author's birth, commemorations included an act of reverence by the Le Fanu family, which saw the installation of a special memorial plaque on the gravesite at Dublin's Mount Jerome Cemetery. Efforts to shine a spotlight on Le Fanu's work include a collection of homage stories printed in *Dreams of Shadows and Smoke* (2014), a tribute anthology edited by Jim Rockhill and Brian J. Showers, and published by Swan River Press. However, the author has not fully come in from the cold, and has certainly not yet emerged from under the shadow of Bram Stoker. Almost a decade later, Irish gothic cinema paid its own homage to the grandfather of the tradition, whose novel *Uncle Silas* (1864) is still relatively obscure. *Lies We Tell*, directed by Lisa Mulcahy – also known for *The Legend of Longwood* (2014), *Red Rock* (2015), and *Sanctuary: A Witches Tale* (2024) – is 'inspired by' Le Fanu's novel, but pays faithful tribute, not only to its source material, but also to a wider literary phenomenon of sensation and the gothic. *Uncle Silas* was termed a 'sensation' novel in its day, a school of literature that emerged in the early 1860s from other modes and genres, with characteristic strains of gothic and detective fiction, usually located in upper-class domestic settings. For its part, *Uncle Silas* influenced Arthur Conan Doyle's mystery novel *The Firm of Girdlestone* (1890) and even inspired parts of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938). Like its source, *Lies We Tell* contains subtextual meaning that is particularly Irish, this time using a nineteenth-century setting to interrogate modern social and cultural concerns around the legal and bodily rights of women. The film shares much in common with du Maurier's novel, and fits equally as comfortably in the more recently coined 'domestic noir' style of fiction, which has been enjoying a long and enduring comeback since Gillian Flynn's 2012 novel *Gone Girl*, adapted for screen by David Fincher in 2014.

The film's gothic atmosphere is beautifully captured from the beginning scenes, which introduce the heroine Maud Ruthyn (Agnes O'Casey) strolling through paradisial countryside amid moss-choked paths surrounding the grounds of her substantial estate. Her father has just died, leaving Maud an heiress, a more dangerous than desirable position for the newfound

orphan. The 'house' itself is a literal gothic manor (Dublin's Ardgillan Castle), complete with turrets and gothic arches. Among these wild and beautiful woodlands, Maud lays a wreath on the headstones of her ancestors, Ruthyns all. Here our young protagonist ponders the question: 'what makes a monster?' True to the sensation-narrative formula, it emerges that the 'monster' is within the family, a generic premise underlying novels and films of the relatively recently coined 'domestic noir' genre, including Freida McFadden's *The Housemaid* (2022) and its 2025 film adaptation (dir. by Paul Feig).[1] Even as the film plays with the often-shared conventions of sensation and domestic-noir fiction, Mulcahy leans more heavily into the latter as we get a female perspective. This is also true of Le Fanu's original text, which is centred around Maud's experience of the world. We might view *Uncle Silas* then, in retrospect, as differing from the works of Le Fanu's male contemporaries writing in the genre – the novels of Wilkie Collins being a useful point of comparison, as they are often told primarily from the male point of view.

Now an heiress, or more properly, a prize, Maud's fate lies in the hands of her dubious trustees. Maud's period of reflective mourning is violently seized by the arrival of seldom-seen relatives. Here to disturb her peaceful bereavement are her disgraced Uncle Silas (David Wilmot), his two children and their 'governess'. Maud dismisses warnings that Silas, 'a most expensive, vicious man' and suspected murderer, should not be welcomed into the ancient Ruthyn home, a decision she soon regrets. In a rare lowering of the heroine's defences, Maud embraces her embattled uncle as she welcomes him and his family into her home. Their presence is menacing. Her cousins Edward (Chris Walley) and Emily (Holly Sturton) are odious in their own ways, and both have designs on Maud's property. After all, the film is set in an era when fortunes are made and unmade through strategic, often incestuous marriages. Silas attempts to persuade Maud to marry her cousin Edward (named Dudley in Le Fanu's novel), 'for what could be better than marrying one's own blood?' Despicably encouraged by his father, Edward forces his attentions and eventually himself on Maud, who is increasingly rendered powerless, as she runs out of legal defences against the usurpation of her estate and the violation of her body.

The film revolves around Maud's attempts to outmanoeuvre her uncle and her untrustworthy trustees who conspire to acquire her substantial fortune. She matches Silas' determination with wit, and although 'unschooled', she consistently challenges the takeover of

[1] Julia Crouch, 'Genre Bender', *Julia Crouch's Blog*, 25 August 2012 <https://juliacrouch.co.uk/blog/genre-bender> [accessed 5 September 2026].

her home. One of many tense confrontations between uncle and niece occurs during a scene set in Maud's father's study, which the pleasure-seeking Silas has transformed into an opium den. The scene is made memorable by the two performers, who demonstrate impressive chemistry as they both attempt to attract and persuade the other through layers of palpable repulsion.

Maud is no shrinking heroine, unlike the similarly persecuted female victims of a Wilkie Collins novel (lily-white Laura Fairlie from Collins' 1860 novel *The Woman in White* comes to mind as quite the contrast). While Le Fanu's Maud is imaginative, sees ghosts and goblins all around, and eventually begins to feel as if she is going mad, there are no hysterics, fainting spells, or fetching of smelling salts necessary for Mulcahy's version of a gothic heroine. Described by her uncle as 'cold', Maud is a pragmatic, complex, and headstrong leading character, made all the more relatable for her various nuances. Maud's words spoken defiantly early in the film – 'I shall never leave Knowl', her family home – express a certain determination that will be severely tested throughout the film. But the threat to Maud in this instance involves more than her property; the sense of sexual danger is precisely what Mulcahy wants us to understand. The claret-swilling, opium-addled Uncle Silas is here to stay, and nothing will get in the way of *his* expected fortune. Despite Maud's admirable attempts to outwit her opponents and gain the upper hand, the proverbial wolves continuously circle outside her door, until eventually, they get in. While physical violation in Le Fanu's text is often sublimated into acts of textual violation, in the form of Uncle Silas' monitoring of letters, diaries, and legal documents, the threat of violation looms over Mulcahy's picture in more overt ways, culminating in Maud's sexual assault by Edward.

Unlike Le Fanu's better-known 'Carmilla' and 'Green Tea' (both 1872), *Uncle Silas* is not a narrative that explicitly draws from the supernatural. Similarly, *Lies We Tell* derives its creepiness from the hair-raising and realistic performances of Wilmot and Walley, to the extent that actual ghosts in this film are superfluous to requirements. The excellently styled cousin Emily, with her tightly ringleted blond curls, is ghoulishly angelic in appearance, which is entirely consistent with her character, at once sweetly seeking a sisterly companionship with Maud while fawning greedily over her jewels and trinkets. The governess 'Madame' (Gráinne Keenan) is a quietly menacing presence, although a significantly toned-down version of Le Fanu's fiendish Madame de la Rougierre, who appears 'like some evil being seen in a dream'.[2] The decision to render the Madame less cartoonish seems altogether the right choice for the

[2] Sheridan Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas* (Wordsworth Editions, 2009), p. 387.

script and demonstrates the film's use of restraint, which is one of its major strengths, especially considering the potential for brash gothic excess in Le Fanu's novel. Mulcahy understands that true monsters are not so conspicuous.

David Wilmot's performance as Silas is an exercise in precision, as he brings a repulsive kind of attraction to the character – at moments almost believable as the benevolent father figure and romantic hero Maud had hoped for earlier in the film. An early scene sees the pair walking hand in hand, Wilmot styled as a gentleman squire. Her uncle arrives at Knowl with his reputation in tatters, and Maud sympathises with the kindly seeming and presumably misunderstood outsider. It does not take long for the veneer to crack, and the first indications of trouble come with Silas' sharp treatment of the aged servants. Wilmot's pale-blue eyes do so much to express the character's oscillation between kindliness and Mephistophelean villainy. A memorable moment of pathos arrives when, during the final showdown between Maud and Silas, our heroine, despite all she has endured, tells an uncaring Silas that 'I would have loved you'.

While diverging from the book in many ways, the film recreates the sensation-gothic narrative technique of 'playing detective' by retaining its first-person perspective. The Ruthyn family secrets emerge for us here at the same pace as they do for Maud, whose point of view we share. As in Le Fanu's novel, we know what Maud does, and we know it through her investigative work. The film modernises the sensation-fiction heroine through O'Casey's punchy and uncompromising performance, her responses to gaslighting from the wider community of male clerics and physicians, the threat on her bodily autonomy, and her lack of options for justice and redress. Using her father's library to read up on her legal recourses as Silas encroaches on all that rightfully belongs to her, she discovers that the law is not on her side. Maud is defiant, and will not submit, even as her corsets become constrained and it becomes clear that she has been impregnated by her rapist, Edward (a shocking departure from Le Fanu's plot). 'I decline to marry my rapist', she repeats.

Le Fanu's original *Uncle Silas* works within the cultural context of the years leading up to the Married Women's Property Act (1870). Le Fanu's themes resonate further with a new era in which women's precarious position in legal contexts – particularly in terms of bodily autonomy – play conspicuously into the film's feminist reflections. The taut script deals with heavy and sensitive subjects, including a sexual threat that results in an onscreen rape and a resultant pregnancy. Such challenging images are handled with the moderation and tact that subjects of this nature demand, and are narrative components that call to mind the contemporary issues that Mulcahy seems to subtly address in this storyline. These issues

include those that are specific to trauma on this island: contraception, divorce, issues of sexual morality, Magdalene laundries, mother-and-baby homes. The end of the film, however, sees Maud as the mistress of her own household. She reflects and wonders 'how I lived through that terrible ordeal'. It's difficult not to see parallels with recent history in Ireland, as those who lived through a repressive religious and state regime here may similarly reflect, 'how did we live through this'?

Director Mulcahy and writer Elisabeth Gooch understand the tradition they are working in, and the homage feels sincere. Mulcahy is attentive to the film's literary roots, not attempting to bring all of its thematic or generic staples into a modern setting, but certainly emphasising the relevance of their feminist entreaties to contemporary audiences. This is a Victorian gothic thriller in its very bones. From its tightly laced costumes to the sensation-gothic screenplay, *Lies We Tell* provides a rich Victorian gothic atmosphere, but with a distinctly modern resonance. In doing so, it combines elements to produce a thoughtful adaptation of an Irish gothic classic, made with genuine affection for the subgenre.

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